

Time for the “Old Line State” to Draw the Line Against Slots

Published in the “Gazette” February 6, 2004

By Steven Silverman

Downtown Silver Spring, 2006. Discovery Communications’ international corporate headquarters highlights the skyline. New theatres, new restaurants abound, and...slot machines ping throughout the new downtown. Far fetched? Think again. Only two blocks from Discovery and the American Film Institute now stands the Tastee Diner, an historic restaurant that already has a lottery venue and keno screens throughout the restaurant. Given the current debate over slots in Maryland, can a few video poker terminals be far behind?

For the second consecutive year, the Maryland General Assembly has opened to a cacophony of conflicting views on the wisdom of expanding gambling in Maryland by legalizing slot machines. Despite a dozen different variations on the same theme, the siren song of slots and “easy money” remains the same.

Annapolis should take a page from the phrase we use when addressing an addiction of another sort and “Just say no.”

The moment of a downturn in the economy is no reason to make ill-advised, profound and essentially irrevocable decisions about how to fund our state’s needs. Legalizing slots would be “dead-on-arrival” in a good economy. And rightly so. But, once enacted, with the money flowing in to state coffers, our state public officials will be hooked on gambling revenue, as has already happened with the \$456 million the state clears annually from the Lottery and Keno. Slots at the racetracks will no doubt lead to slots outside the tracks and, as some are already discussing, to casinos.

Stories about the downside of legalized gambling make slots proponents uncomfortable. They are more comfortable with upscale ads of the sort that promote Delaware slots, ads that show young, attractive folks in snazzy clothes high-fiving each other as the jackpot bings away in the background. They don’t want to think that the money for gambling comes out of the money set aside to pay the heating bill. Or the new pair of shoes for the three-year-old. Or the groceries that have to last to the end of the month. But, all too often, that’s exactly where the money comes from.

Public officials who are loath to raise taxes to support the spending they want take solace in revenue from gambling. At least, they say, it’s not a tax. Not true.

Legalized gambling is an unequal tax on poor and working families in Maryland -- and yes, it is a tax collected from those least likely to afford it. A survey of

Maryland Lottery revenues showed a correlation between high lottery sales and poor and minority neighborhoods, including places in Silver Spring, Wheaton, and Gaithersburg.

Some might say that those who play the slots are adults and know what they are doing. Here's something to think about, though. Maryland spends millions of dollars in advertising encouraging those who have already bet a great deal to bet a great deal more. It makes you wonder which party is the most addicted – the problem gambler or the state that feels it has to spend millions to urge him to ante up and double down.

There are a lot of good reasons to oppose the expansion of legalized gambling.

Gambling creates social costs for which you and I pick up the tab – in family disintegration, welfare, substance abuse, and – yes – more crime.

Gambling is swampy ground upon which to sink our state's economic and business foundations. It depends not on the genius and talents and energies of Marylanders seeking to build a better future but rather feeds upon human frailty and weakness. Studies have shown that the vast majority of monies that go to slots are taken from other businesses in the areas where they operate

Gambling strengthens the values of “get-rich-quick” and “instant gratification” at the expense of hard work, thrift, and responsibility. It sends exactly the wrong message to our young people about “how the world works.”

On some level, Governor Ehrlich understands all this. After all, he doesn't want slots in “family-oriented” communities such as the Timonium Fairgrounds. It is also naïve to think that slots won't find their way to the most populous jurisdiction in the state, Montgomery County, when the Lottery and Keno are already here.

It's time to realize there is no consensus among Marylanders to expand legalized gambling in the state. So, rather than overreacting to the budget shortfall with steps we'll regret later, let's take a leaf from the Hippocratic Oath that doctors take: first, do no harm.

There are many proposals such as closing corporate loopholes, raising the income tax on those who earn more than \$150,000, and raising the state sales tax, which could produce the revenues to address this budget crisis.

We Marylanders should roll up our collective sleeves and have the gumption to find an honest way to pay our bills.

#

Steve Silverman, Democrat-at-Large, is President of the Montgomery County Council.